

Executive Summary

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Ocean State Outdoors is the State of Rhode Island's comprehensive plan for outdoor recreation, conservation and open space. The plan is one cornerstone of Rhode Island's statewide system for planning for our natural and built environment. With an increasing sense of urgency to protect the beauty and fragility of Rhode Island's natural resources and to encourage excellent community design, this plan aims to clarify our vision and the planning framework for all Rhode Islanders.

This plan, the seventh edition, reaffirms our overarching goals, reassesses the present situation, and establishes the objectives and the implementation strategies for strengthening outdoor recreation, conservation and open space in Rhode Island over the next five years.

As a Rhode Island state policy document, *Ocean State Outdoors* serves several key purposes:

State Guide Plan. This plan is an element of the Rhode Island State Guide Plan, and, as such, has legislated stature which requires the consistency of all publicly supported activities, both planning and project implementation. State agencies, municipalities and all public and private entities receiving public support are expected to carry out any recreation, conservation and open space activity in a way that is consistent with this element of the State Guide Plan.

State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) -- *Ocean State Outdoors* is also submitted by Rhode Island to meet the National Park Service's planning eligibility requirements for the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund program. While resources of this program have diminished, it remains a valuable source of support for protecting resources and providing facilities for public recreational use.

State Recreational Trails Plan -- In concert with Rhode Island's Greenways Plan¹, this plan addresses the requirements of the U.S. Department of Transportation -- Federal Highway Administration's National Recreational Trails Program which provides funds to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities.

Wetlands Priority Plan -- This plan provides an update to the wetlands priority plan required under the federal Emergency Wetlands Conservation Act. Updates to the original 1988 plan are submitted to the National Park Service periodically as part of SCORP updates.

The Rhode Island Planning Framework

¹ A Greener Path: Greenspace and Greenways for Rhode Island's Future. R.I. Division of Planning. 1994.

Providing for the public's enjoyment of Rhode Island's outdoor environment is an important responsibility of state government and a cherished tradition. This document is the seventh SCORP produced since 1965. In those intervening decades, the interest and commitment of Rhode Islanders for outdoor recreation, conservation and open space protection has continually deepened.

At the same time, our public planning efforts have become more multi-faceted and better connected and they have been strengthened by the groundswell of the movements for environmental protection, historic preservation, public participation and now, growth management and quality of life. We have inherited a Rhode Island which is blessed with many special places, natural settings, historic districts and sites, and many local areas which still have unique characteristics. As a state, we have assumed responsibility for protecting and enhancing these places and resources. This plan re-affirms our overarching themes, as stated in the 1992 SCORP:

1. *Protecting Precious Gifts ...Open Space and Critical Resources*
2. *Meeting Critical Needs ... Delivering Recreation and Resource Conservation*
3. *Stewardship and Partnership ...Taking Good Care of our Outdoor Recreation System*

Rhode Island's has, in place, the statewide framework which connects the state agencies and the local municipalities in support of major goals and policies for public planning and implementation. We also have official, adopted plans at the state and municipal levels. Our constant mission is to reassess, redirect and refine those plans as we move forward.

As an element of the *State Guide Plan*, this updated *Ocean State Outdoors*, provides guidance to all state agencies and municipalities in their plans and programs for recreation and open space. This *State Guide Plan* element establishes the state policies and implementation program with which the community comprehensive plans must be consistent.

Ocean State Outdoors, remains the cornerstone plan of the state's recreation, conservation and open space system. It articulates state goals and policies, guiding the municipal governments and not-for-profit groups, and, in particular, mapping out a five year action agenda for the state agencies, led by the Department of Environmental Management. As an inter-related system, other elements of the State Guide Plan support this plan, in particular *A Greener Path ... Greenspace and Greenways for Rhode Island's Future* and *The Urban and Community Forest Plan*, and state guide plan elements for land use, transportation, economic development, water supply and others also contain important related guidance.

Reinforcing good planning practices which the state and municipal SCORP plans have promoted for several decades, the *RI Comprehensive Planning and Land Use Regulation Act (1989)* has required new and stronger interconnections and consistency between state and local plans. All Rhode Island municipalities now have a locally approved Comprehensive Community Plan which must be updated regularly. Over the past decade, the community plans have been formally incorporated into much of Rhode Island's planning, both policy and practice. Plan approval status and consistency with the *State Guide Plan* are often criteria for state approvals and grant-funding.

Accomplishments since the 1992 Plan

The decade since the last edition of this plan has witnessed considerable advances: four major state open space bonds and numerous local bonds provided an investment of over \$73 million inland and new facilities for Rhode Island's recreation and open space system. The State Greenspace and Greenways Plan set a target in 1994 of protecting 35,000 acres via acquisition (by all sectors) by 2020. In 2000, former Governor Almond proposed, and the General Assembly endorsed through enactment of a \$34 million Open Space bond issue, an accelerated program to attain the 35,000 acre acquisition goal by 2010. This infusion allowed an historic expansion and improvement of the recreational opportunities available to Rhode Islanders. Nearly 7,000 acres has been added to the state recreation and open space system, 1,857 acres of threatened farmland has been preserved, and 3,115 acres of local open space has been protected.

Research for this Plan Update

New research conducted particularly for the 2003 update of Ocean State Outdoors, investigated existing conditions and the current supply and demand for recreation and natural resource protection in Rhode Island from several vantage points. The inventory of existing statewide recreation facilities was updated and three surveys obtained input from the general public and state and local recreation professionals. Analysis of the current inventory, survey results and demographic data have led to the following general findings on facility and land needs for outdoor recreation in Rhode Island:

NEEDS

- *Outdoor recreation in its many varied forms is a vital component of the lives of Rhode Islanders*
- *The most popular outdoor activities are those that are most accessible and simplest to engage in*
- *Significant needs continue for land and facilities to accommodate public demands for outdoor recreation and protect natural resources*
- *Rhode island's outdoor recreation facilities are important assets for the state and its communities that require investment and operational resource levels commensurate with their heavy usage and documented asset management needs.*
- *Continuing improvement of the information and educational /interpretative resources available to patrons of Rhode Island's outdoor recreation system is crucial to the public's knowledge and understanding of the system's diverse resources, and can assist in balancing system usage.*

The accomplishments of the last decade taken together with the needs identified by our citizens and professionals and multiplied by those we will serve in the future lead us to reaffirm the direction taken in previous plans. As such, the Plan sets forth a vision for our recreational resources together with the following objectives and policies. Part Four

includes a fuller discussion of these underlying tenets that will direct the actions for Rhode Island over the next five years to achieve our vision, goals and objectives.

The Vision:

A statewide system of connecting Greenspaces and Greenways, a network made up of critical natural and cultural resources, outdoor recreation facilities, public spaces, community and urban forests, public and private open spaces. The Greenspace system is to be Rhode Island's permanent green framework within which the state's communities will design and build in the 21st century.

Plan Goals and Policies:

Goal 1 *Building the Greenspace Network...Preserve and Protect Natural and Cultural Resources*

Rhode Island will strengthen and expand the statewide network of Greenspaces and Greenways, with natural and cultural resources and outdoor recreation areas as major features of the network.

Policies: **Aggressively pursue creation of an integrated, statewide greenspace and greenways system through coordinated state and local planning, strategic acquisition, resource protection partnerships and integration of green infrastructure in development projects.**

Maintain natural diversity by preserving the integrity of the ecosystems.

Protect water resources, including rivers, lakes, ponds, streams and surrounding lands.

Protect surface and groundwater resource areas, critical watershed and aquifer recharge areas.

Protect wetlands and floodplains to maintain their natural functions and to minimize damage from floods.

Protect significant island and coastal sites.

Conserve and enhance urban and community forests for multiple uses—water supply and water quality, recreation, forest products, energy and wildlife habitat – as fundamental to high quality woodland and urban environments.

Support agricultural uses and preserve the best farmland for active agricultural purposes.

Protect and maintain fish and wildlife populations at optimum levels and provide opportunities for wildlife-based recreation.

Preserve significant historic, architectural and archeological sites, buildings and districts.

Protect scenic areas and resources including landscapes, roadways, and views of the waterfront and significant geologic features

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Goal 2 *Meeting Critical Needs...Improve Recreation Opportunities and Resource Conservation*

Rhode Island will improve its system of outdoor recreation facilities and conservation areas to meet the needs of its citizens.

Policies: Provide a diverse, balanced system offering quality recreational opportunities that meet user needs.

Preserve and expand public access to the shoreline

Improve and expand opportunities for recreational use of saltwater beaches

Preserve and expand recreational boating opportunities

Preserve and expand access to the state's rivers, lakes, ponds, streams and other inland waters for recreational use, while maintaining water quality.

Provide hunting, fishing and other extensive recreational opportunities while protecting resources and natural character of the state's management areas.

Provide hunting and fishing opportunities, where feasible, throughout the state.

Maintain and expand the state's network of trails and pedestrian paths, in natural and built areas.

Strengthen and expand opportunities for open space and outdoor recreation for urban residents.

Strengthen and expand community-based recreation facilities and open spaces to meet close-to-home needs.

Maintain and expand active and passive greenspace facilities in densely-developed neighborhoods and districts throughout the state.

Coordinate regional initiatives in conservation and recreation and promote sharing of facilities to meet needs on a regional, multi-town basis.

Promote Rhode Island's open space and recreation resources to tourists, while protecting the quality and stability of the resource base.

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Goal 3 Stewardship and Partnership... Improve Accessibility, Operations and Resource Management

Rhode Island's public and private partners will join as strong stewards of the state's outdoor recreation and open space system and will protect, maintain, and improve its essential features.

Policies: Insure a system that is accessible to all potential users.

Cooperatively support appropriate levels of funding for the acquisition, development and renovation of the state's open spaces and recreation facilities.

Provide sufficient resources for effective operation and maintenance of state and local parks, recreation facilities and conservation areas.

Demonstrate and promote sustainable design and building concepts in recreation projects.

Provide strong public outreach and effective information about the public recreational opportunities.

Develop and maximize opportunities for education within the greenspace system about the system and its specific resources

Strengthen the professional capacity for recreation, conservation and open space planning at all levels

Maintain a coordinated planning and implementation program for the statewide system that includes State, municipal and private agencies

Encourage information-sharing and cooperative initiatives among the state's public and private greenspace partners.

Our mission is more urgent as Rhode Island faces ever-increasing development pressures. The Plan reestablishes an aggressive goal of preserving 3000 acres per year. This may not be sufficient! We need to reexamine this goal and do so before the next update of this plan because every delay threatens our ability to protect what needs to be protected. While we will look to *Ocean State Outdoors* for guidance we must also recognize that it can be a dynamic document that responds to the needs as we understand those needs.

